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WINKLER, INC.

Grows Grocery Business With Old-School Style

By Anthony Schoettle

Josh Winkler sits in his office in the small town of Dale about 35 miles northeast of Evansville pondering the advances of the company he and his brother, John, run.

The Winkler brothers are the fifth generation owners of Winkler, Inc., situated in the town of 1,500 residents, and the duo is intent on feeding the growth that made the wholesale and retail grocery operation one of Spencer County's biggest employers.

He rattles off a list of improvements the company has made in rapid-fire succession; new and upgraded breakroom, offices and bathrooms, lockers for employees and a spiffy dispenser to fill employees' water bottles. In all, Winkler added 10,000 square feet to its cold storage facility in Dale.

The business, which was founded in 1911, also installed a new cybersecurity system because wholesalers have been a recent target of cybercriminals.

The privately held family operation has been busy upgrading its nine retail grocery stores in southern Indiana as well – including new refrigerators and freezers, remodeled and expanded delis and enhanced lighting. The idea, Josh Winkler explains, is to keep stores “more energy efficient and appealing.”

While those advancements have helped keep Winkler, Inc. thriving, they may not be its biggest competitive edge. Something decidedly old school is what truly sets this grocer apart.

In a nod to a time gone by, the Winkler brothers – 45-year-old Josh and 53-year-old John – answer their own phones and return their own calls. With every deal they make comes a handshake and a promise their customers know they'll keep. Shoppers won't find any self-checkout lines at their retail stores and shouldn't expect to carry grocery bags to their vehicles either. Winkler employees handle all of that.

“We hang our hats on service,” Josh Winkler expresses earnestly.

The company isn't necessarily interested in making inroads into huge cities and the Winklers aren't all that concerned with landing the biggest customers. Instead, they are anchors in often rural communities in America's Heartland.

Winkler customer representatives go into places like Greenville, Missouri, a town of 511 residents and a few thousand tourists during the summer. It also treads into communities like Haubstadt and Ferdinand in Indiana, both of which have populations under 2,500 and the equally small bergs of Villa Grove, Illinois; Uniontown, Kentucky and Raymond, Ohio – all places few folks have ever pondered or even heard of.

In all, Winkler sends out 10 53-foot trailers full of food every day, serving about 400 wholesale customers

Address: 535 E. Medcalf St., Dale IN, 47523 (main office and dry warehouse)

Phone: (812) 937-4421, (800) 621-3843

Web site: www.winklerinc.com

Employees: 470

Resource: Josh Winkler, president and co-owner

in Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri and Ohio. Josh Winkler embraces his small-town clients and is proud of those connections and the path the company has taken.

"We like our footprint," Winkler states. "If the right opportunity presented itself, we'd sure look at it. But bigger isn't always better. We like slow, steady growth that we can wrap our hands around. We want to be profitable, a good employer and a good partner to our customers. That's more important than being huge to us."

In these smaller corners of the Midwest, the Winkler team earns its business one store at a time. And they build loyalty by doing what some business operators might consider crazy.

"We still believe in face-to-face, hands-on business," Winkler emphasizes. "Hopefully our customers feel the same way. We're accessible, flexible and agile. Those are important qualities."

A friend indeed

Richard Crites has been a Winkler wholesale customer for 22 years. But it wasn't always that way. Crites owns and operates Richard's Supermarket in Greenville, Missouri, 120 miles south of St. Louis.

For years, a Winkler sales representative, known within the company as a retail counselor, came into Crites' 10,000-square-foot store and politely asked if he could help him with anything. Crites repeatedly replied "thanks, but no thanks."

But when Crites' current supplier raised prices more than his operation could handle and the service became a little less reliable, he picked up the phone and gave Winkler's rep a call. Winkler did more than supply groceries and other items his regulars and vacationers to the area sought. They became like part of the family, Crites relates. Even the Winkler owners became personally acquainted with Crites and his tiny team.

So, it was a little less awkward to ask for help when Crites was hit by a storm – literally.

Four years ago, a one-two punch of flooding and intense winds closed Old Greenville, an outdoors lovers' paradise two-and-a-half miles from Richard's Supermarket. That closure lasted two years and more than half of Richard's business dried up.

"We had some really rough times," Crites admits. When he called Winkler, Josh drove out himself "and helped us work everything out."

"I don't know if we would still be in business if it wasn't for Winkler," he adds. "That's what a family business does versus a corporation. As long as they're there, I'll be buying from them. That's the type of loyalty they have in me."

Philanthropically driven

Winkler's good deeds don't stop at customers. There is hardly a fundraiser or charitable event in Dale or Spencer County that Winkler isn't involved in, relates Kathy Reinke, Spencer County Chamber of Commerce executive director.

"The Winkler family is so awesome," Reinke shares. "They're so supportive of so many things like the Kiwanis Club and the Dale Fall Festival. And they're not just writing checks, they really get involved, going to meetings, helping plan events and taking part in a lot of other initiatives – and all behind the scenes. They never want any credit."

When Reinke decided to hold a charity run to raise money for scholarships in honor of her 14-year-old daughter who was killed in an automobile accident, she says Winkler was one of the first local companies to volunteer to help and supplied food for all the runners.

"There's no better long-term corporate citizen here than Winkler," Reinke stresses. "They've been in Dale for more than 100 years, and they've always been committed to this town. It's not uncommon for a company, as it grows, to seek a bigger city, with perhaps more resources, to be in. Winkler continued where they put



Brothers Josh, left, and John Winkler have ushered in big growth at the company their relatives started in 1911. Some things haven't changed. "When you call our office, you get a warm, friendly voice," Josh says.

their roots down and have tried to build the community around that. That's one of the things that makes this company such a special story."

We are family

The thought of making its headquarters and primary operations in any place other than Dale has never crossed company officials' minds.

"We have hard-working people around Dale and we have hospitable people here. We have a lot of German Catholic influence here," Winkler relays. "There's no union and good transportation with I-64 and U.S. 231, which was recently upgraded. The I-69 extension has helped. We have great schools here and people are happy to raise their kids in this area."

"The town of Dale and Spencer County officials are business friendly and have been very good to work with. We're able to find very talented, honest, hard-working people here. The vast majority of our workers come from a 30-minute radius."

Reinke says one of the big reasons why Winkler has little trouble finding talent is its reputation.

"They have a lot of employees who have worked there for many, many years and that's a strong indicator of how they treat their employees," she conveys. "From the warehouse to the freezer to the office, Winkler is a great place to work. That's a known fact in this county. They want to be that employer that if you do the job, they treat you well. They're like a big family that works really well together."

Small towns, big business

Don't let Winkler's family vibe and small-town customers fool you. It's a sizable operation. One with 470 employees – 150 on the wholesale side and 320 in retail – and two locations in Dale encompassing its

headquarters, dry warehouse and cold storage facility as well as its own trucking fleet.

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Their initial deliveries of produce, poultry and eggs were made via horse-drawn wagons.

The focus on service – there from the start – has propelled the grocer/wholesaler on a path of steady growth for most of its 112 years.

The company moved to its current location on the east side of Dale in 1957. In 1982, the business then known as J. Winkler & Sons, added a frozen food and fresh meat facility on the north side of Dale along Interstate 64.

Winkler branched out into retail in the 1980s with the purchase of Wesselman's Supermarket in Evansville. In 2015, Winkler further expanded with the acquisition of Holiday Foods. Last year, Winkler grew its retail operation again with the acquisition of the Save U More Market in Boonville.

In 2016, Winkler acquired Grocers Supply in Indianapolis which brought the service area into northern Indiana, eastern Ohio, southern



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Michigan and northern Illinois. Today, Winkler operates out of two distribution centers that stock more than 16,000 products and the company delivers tens of thousands more directly from manufacturers.

By early 2020, Winkler had seen its annual revenue hit \$140 million. During the pandemic it spiked to \$165 million. Now, Josh Winkler says, it's steady at \$160 million.

"On a daily basis, it's a David versus Goliath battle. But our saving grace is our niche," Winkler imparts. "There's a place for us in the smaller markets. There aren't a lot of wholesalers looking to supply the smaller stores in the small towns. It's very gratifying to know we're connected to those independent grocery stores – and the people who rely on them."

RESOURCES: Richard Crites, Richard's Supermarket, at www.richardssupermarket.com | Kathy Reinke, Spencer County Chamber of Commerce, at www.facebook.com/SpencerCountyChamber | Josh Winkler, Winkler, Inc., at www.winklerinc.com

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